

Lois Capps

1938–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

1998–



Image courtesy of the Member

WIFE AND POLITICAL CONFIDANTE OF A theology professor-turned-politician, Lois Capps won a special election to the U.S. House after the death of her husband, Walter Capps. In the subsequent Congresses in which she served, Capps carved out her own niche as an advocate for health care and environmental protection.

Lois Ragnhild Grimsrud was born in Ladysmith, Wisconsin, on January 10, 1938, to Jorgen and Solveig Grimsrud. Lois Grimsrud earned a B.S. degree in nursing from Pacific Lutheran University in 1959 and an M.A. in religion from Yale University in 1964. She received an M.A. in education from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1990. Lois married Walter Holden Capps in 1960, and the couple raised three children: Lisa, Todd, and Laura. From 1960 to 1964, Lois Capps worked as a nursing instructor and head nurse at the Yale New Haven Hospital and also as a staff nurse in Hamden, Connecticut. When the family relocated to California, Capps worked as an elementary school nurse in Santa Barbara County, California, from 1968 to 1970 and from 1977 to 1996. She also taught part-time at the Santa Barbara City College from 1983 to 1995. In 1996, she worked on her husband's successful Democratic congressional campaign for a California U.S. House seat, which the GOP had held since World War II.

On October 28, 1997, Representative Walter Capps died suddenly of a heart attack, and in early 1998 Lois Capps announced her candidacy to fill the vacant seat encompassing California's central coast. Capps defeated Republican state assemblyman Tom Bordonaro in the March 9, 1998, special election, 53 to 45 percent.¹ On March 17, 1998, Capps was sworn in to the 105th Congress (1997–1999), where she received her husband's assignments on the International Relations and Science committees. She again faced Bordonaro in the general election for the 106th Congress (1999–2001) later that fall, winning with 55 percent of the vote. In the 106th Congress, she relinquished her two committee assignments to take a seat on the Commerce Committee, renamed the Energy and Commerce Committee in the 107th Congress (2001–2003). In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Representative Capps secured a spot on the Budget Committee.

Capps draws on her health care background in her committee and subcommittee assignments and in many of the caucuses she chairs. She is a founder and co-chair of the House Nursing Caucus and the Democratic Vice Chair of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues. Capps also serves as co-chair of the Congressional Heart and Stroke Coalition, the House Cancer Caucus, the Congressional Biomedical Research Caucus, the Congressional School Health and Safety Caucus, the Congressional Hearing Health Caucus, and the House Democratic Task Force on Health.

Capps' experience in health care has made her a respected leader in Congress on issues of public health. In 2002 she passed the Nurse Reinvestment Act, legislation to address the national nursing shortage. Capps' legislation, the Domestic Violence Screening, Treatment and Prevention Act, focused on the health care aspects of domestic violence and was passed as part of the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, which became law in 2006. Capps also passed legislation to curb underage drinking, improve mental health services, provide emergency defibrillators to local communities, bring CPR instruction to schools, and provide immediate Medicare coverage to patients suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease. In 2006 Capps introduced two bills, the HEART for Women Act and the Comprehensive Cancer Care Improvement Act, dedicated to improving public health and reflecting her commitment to patient advocacy.

Capps has also been at the forefront of environmental protection. Capps repeatedly led efforts to stop new oil and gas development off our coasts and on our public lands. The House repeatedly passed her amendments to continue the longstanding ban against new offshore oil and gas development. In 2005 Capps introduced the Los Padres National Forest Conservation Act (H.R. 3149), legislation to permanently ban new oil and gas development in the forest. Capps also led the effort to remove the harmful MTBE liability provision in the Energy Act of 2005, protecting consumers from shouldering the financial burden of cleaning up MTBE contamination in their water supplies. In 2006 she co-founded the National Marine Sanctuary Caucus.

In 2002, Representative Capps faced Republican businesswoman Beth Rogers in a newly apportioned California district and won election to a fourth term with her widest margin to date, 59 to 38 percent. Two years later, Capps earned a seat in the 109th Congress (2005–2007) when she defeated Republican Don Regan by a 63 to 34 percent margin.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Lois Capps," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 Todd Purdum, "Democrat's Widow Wins California House Race," 12 March 1998, *New York Times*: A 12; "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>. For a summary of Capps's legislative efforts related to health care, see *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2003): 110.